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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 001845

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SUBJECT: SHARON'S CABINET SECRETARY DOES THE MATH AND FORESEES A NEW COALITION... SOON

REF: TEL AVIV 1741

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel C. Kurtzer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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11. (C) Summary: Cabinet Secretary Israel Maimon predicted to Ambassador Kurtzer March 23 that the present government would not last long. He cited as evidence of "the beginning of the end" the Shas-sponsored no-confidence motion the previous day -- hastily withdrawn to show solidarity after the Sheikh Yasin assassination -- in which a majority of MKs had been set to vote against Sharon. Maimon predicted that with hard work, the PM would be able to get his disengagement plan approved by the Cabinet, but that the approval would provoke the departure of the National Union and the National Religious Party from the coalition. Among the Likud Cabinet members, Maimon said the PM could count on the support of Ministers Olmert, Mofaz, and Ezra. Ministers Landau, Katz, and Hanegbi are all firmly opposed. Maimon was clearly relieved that Finance Minister Netanyahu's "yes, but" approach to the disengagement plan had served to undercut would-be Likud rebels. End Summary.

"The Beginning of the End"

12. (C) "Anyone with any political experience knows this government will not last forever.... The break point will be when there is a government decision in support of the disengagement plan." So said GOI Cabinet Secretary, Israel Maimon, in a March 23 meeting with the Ambassador, in which he predicted the departure of the National Union and National Religious Party as soon as the Government approves the Gaza withdrawal plan.

13. (C) Illustrating the point, Maimon cited the "close call" the previous day in the Knesset, where Sharon had barely avoided an embarrassing no-confidence motion introduced by Shas. (Note: The motion was withdrawn, apparently at the request of Likud Whip Gidon Sa'ar, to show solidarity in the aftermath of the killing of Hamas leader Sheikh Yassin. End Note.) According to Maimon's calculations, had the resolution not been withdrawn, the vote would have gone against Sharon 52-47, with several Likud lawmakers among those who would have voted in the majority. While taking the point that this vote would not have jeopardized the Sharon government, Maimon nonetheless felt that the experience represented "the beginning of the end" of the present government. (Note: To be successful, a no-confidence vote must garner at least 61 votes in the 120-member Knesset. In addition, those voting against the PM would have to agree on a consensus candidate to replace the PM, something on which it is difficult to envision Shas, Meretz, and right-wing MKs agreeing. End Note.) "It isn't right," he said, "for the Prime Minister not to have a majority. It means the government has no right to govern."

NRP and NU Want Out

14. (C) On National Union, Maimon cited a conversation he had held recently with Tourism Minister Benny Elon, who told him that the NU would quit the coalition, even if the disengagement plan is Gaza-only. Maimon confirmed rumors the Ambassador had heard that Transportation Minister Avigdor "Yvet" Lieberman, also of NU, wanted to stay in the government as long as possible, however. Emphasizing the confidentiality of his information, Maimon said Lieberman

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would stay in the government "until the first bulldozer moves in, or the first settler is evacuated." He said there was a "slight chance" that Lieberman would stay even after such moves; indeed it was Maimon's judgment that Lieberman, who is not an MK, "would do anything to stay in government." He pointed out that this would cause a split in the party, however, noting that Israeli law limits the conditions under which political parties serving in government can split. (Note: If NU decided to leave the government, Lieberman could hypothetically remain in his ministerial seat at the discretion of the PM. Lieberman would probably not be able

to continue representing the NU, unless that party agreed, and he could end up without party affiliation.)

15. (C) Turning to the National Religious Party, Maimon noted that there are differences between MKs Effi Eitam and Zevulun Orlev about how to proceed. He predicted, however, that, "In the end, all six NRP MKs will be outside government." He also wagered that the threshold for the NRP's departure would be much lower than that of the NU's Lieberman.

16. (C) Asked why the right-wing MKs would not choose to stay in government, where they would be better positioned to block the disengagement plan, Maimon answered that "This is where values come into the equation." Beyond the MKs' own ideological motivations, it would be inconceivable that the YESHA (settlers) constituency would allow these ministers to remain in government. Moreover, with the exception of Lieberman, these cabinet members would still be able to bring their opposition to the Knesset. Indeed, some of them have already been doing so, he said, pointing out that NU MK Arie Elad had voted against the PM in a no-confidence motion earlier in the week.

Likud Head Count

17. (C) Asked about the PM's support within the Likud, Maimon said that he could at least "see the horizon" thanks to the "yes, but" offered by Finance Minister Netanyahu in response to Sharon's presentation of his disengagement plans at the March 21 Likud faction meeting (reftel reports on that faction meeting). Had Netanyahu instead said "no, but," Maimon continued, things would look quite different. Noting that Netanyahu was the second to speak at that session, Maimon said Bibi's speech "took the wind out of the sails of those who were to speak afterwards." (Note: Education Minister Livnat, who came out against the plan, had spoken prior to Netanyahu. End Note.)

18. (C) Ultimately, Maimon predicted, the PM would have the votes he needs from Likud, but he said it would take a great deal of pressure -- even if Netanyahu succeeds in securing U.S. guarantees on settlement blocs, the right of return, and moving the separation barrier. Ticking through the definite "yes's", he boasted that Minister-Without-Portfolio Gideon Ezra could always be counted on to do "whatever the PM wants." He added that Defense Minister Mofaz and Industry and Trade Minister Olmert could also be counted on to support the PM's plan. He acknowledged, however, that Likud members Uzi Landau, Tzachi Hanegbi, and Yisrael Katz were all opposed to the plan and that there was "no chance" of convincing them otherwise. He did not anticipate that any of them would resign, however.

19. (C) Maimon commented that even the "moderates" within Likud have reservations about unilateral disengagement. Minister-Without-Portfolio Shearit reportedly told Maimon that Israel should receive some benefit for withdrawing from Palestinian territories -- preferably from the Palestinians or, failing that, from the United States. In addition, without having spoken directly to Immigration and Absorption Minister Tzipi Livni, Maimon was convinced that her support would be contingent on some kind of trade-off on the right of return. Asked about Foreign Minister Shalom's views, Maimon pled ignorance.

110. (C) On the subject of Shalom, Maimon took satisfaction that, unlike Construction and Housing Minister Effi Eitam, the FM toed the PM's line on disengagement on his overseas trips. He confided that Sharon had taken Eitam to task for his transgressions on this score, albeit without any noticeable effect. Eitam reportedly told Sharon that, absent a binding government decision on the issue of disengagement, "everything is fair game," a point on which Maimon editorialized that Eitam would probably not consider himself bound even after a government decision.

"What are We Going to Do About Arik?"

111. (C) Noting that he had been closely watching the body language of Sharon's Cabinet and Likud faction colleagues ever since the PM's announcement of his disengagement plan, Maimon said it is not only the far Right that no longer recognizes Sharon. The eyes of Likud members "were literally bulging," he said, during the PM's March 22 speech to the faction. Limor Livnat's face, according to Maimon, had "Who IS this guy?" written all over it. He had also overheard two MKs clucking, "What are we going to do about Arik?"

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